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Book Review

**The Beautiful Risk of Education**

The last two decades have witnessed an intensification of the push to standardize education and subject it to neoliberal accountability mechanisms and technologies, at least in the advanced capitalist societies. This, generally speaking, is the stage upon which Gert Biesta’s evolving educational theory(ies) has been composed, and *The Beautiful Risk of Education* represents the third book-length contribution to this important and welcome intervention. Biesta uses this book to explore two corresponding central components of education which are today increasingly being removed from educational policy and the dominant educational discourse: risk and weakness. It is the fundamental risk and weakness of education that are at stake in what Biesta (2010, 2013) has termed the ‘learnification’ of education.

In the acknowledgements preceding the manuscript, Biesta locates the book as part of a trilogy that includes his 2006 book, *Beyond Learning: Democratic Education for a Human Future* and his 2010 book, *Good Education in an Age of Measurement: Ethics, Politics, Democracy*. Indeed, these three books share a concern to reclaim ‘education’ from the weight of the learning society, which entails asking questions about what exactly constitutes the practice called education. Biesta’s distinction between learning and education is key to understanding the impetus behind his work. In *Beyond Learning*, Biesta argues against what he calls the ‘new language of learning’ which refers to a discursive shift away from ‘education’ and towards ‘learning’. In that book, Biesta (2006) identified two problems with this language and the material effects that it has on educational policy and practice: first, that it ‘facilitates an economic understanding of the process of education’ and second, ‘that it makes it very difficult to raise questions about the content and purpose of education’ (p. 24). Relating these two problematics is a tight linkage between education and the economy, whereby ‘questions about the content and purpose of education become subject to the forces of the market instead of being the concern of professional judgment and democratic deliberation’ (p. 31).

The reader of *The Beautiful Risk* will notice Biesta turning away from explicit talk of the market, and the two problems with the learning become: (1) that learning designates a process and ‘is in itself neutral or empty with regard to content, direction, and purpose’; and (2) that learning ‘is an individualistic and individualizing term’ that moves ‘attention away from the importance of relationships in educational processes and practices’ (p. 63). In place of the educational relationship arises educational
accountability, and the accompanying regimes of accountability seek precisely to eradicate the risk of education; ‘They [policymakers, politicians, the popular press, “the public,” and organizations such as the World Bank] want education to be strong, secure, and predictable, and want it to be risk-free at all levels’ (p. 1). Throughout the book, Biesta will convincingly argue through an assemblage of theories and approaches that risk is what defines education. This risk of education, and the weakness that it signals and results from, must be embraced, although such an embrace will necessarily entail a continual deconstruction and radical opening of education and educational responsibility.

At this point, I’d like to survey a few of the ways that Biesta explores the weakness of education. To begin, consider the role of communication in education, which was elevated by John Dewey’s advocacy for a participatory and dialogic theory of communication through which ‘meaning is made and shared’ as a result of ‘an encounter between subjects, not an exchange between objects’ (p. 35). Biesta respects Dewey’s attempts to wrestle education free from the metaphysics of essence (and the transmission model of education), yet he does not think that Dewey was necessarily successful, as he replaced consciousness as the starting point with communication as a starting point. To take the weakness of education and communication seriously we must not assume a common foundation, whether that be consciousness (a thing) or communication (a process), because such a foundation set in advance will necessarily create exclusions and potentially foreclose the possibility of what or who a subject can become through education. In other words, if we say that communication consists of a certain set of practices we then close ourselves off from new and different forms of communication. Here, Biesta proposes a ‘deconstructive pragmatism’ that recognizes that ‘communication is a weak, open, and risky process, a process that is only made possible by taking the radical openness and unpredictability of all communication seriously’ (p. 41). What communication is or can be emerges through—and not before—communication itself.

Why does Biesta insist on and continually foreground a radical openness and unpredictability? We can find an answer to this question in a framework that Biesta (2010, 2013) has advanced for asking after the purposes of education. Biesta proposes three domains—or functions—of education: qualification, socialization, and subjectification. The qualification domain concerns ‘the acquisition of knowledge, skills, values, and dispositions’; the socialization domain is about ‘the ways in which, through education, we become part of existing traditions and ways of doing and being’; and the subjectification domain refers to the ‘subjectivity or “subject-ness” of those we educate. It has to do with emancipation and freedom and with the responsibility that comes with such freedom’ (2013, p. 4). Biesta believes that all three domains are important for education, but is particularly concerned with the subjectification function: he defines ‘education worthy of the name’ as ‘education that is not only interested in qualification and socialization but also in subjectification’ (p. 139). It is, after all, the process of subjectification that brings something radically new into the world, something that cannot be foreseen; nurturing the risk and weakness inherent in education is what can allow for this radical newness.
In order to articulate the emancipation and freedom associated with subjectification in education, Biesta calls on Michel Foucault and Jacques Rancière. Biesta argues against both monological and dialogical approaches to emancipation. In the former form, emancipation ‘relies on the assumption that emancipation requires an intervention from the outside’, in which case emancipation ‘is done to somebody’ (p. 71). Dialogical emancipation, associated with Paulo Freire, is ‘a process of the collective discovery of oppressive structures, processes, and practices’ (p. 71). Both of these models, Biesta objects, ‘ultimately rely on the possibility of truth and, more specifically, truth uncontaminated by power’ (p. 72). By turning to Foucault’s notion of eventalization, which ‘means to complicate and to pluralize our understanding of events, their elements, their relations, and their domains of reference’, (p. 73) we can restrain ourselves from assuming that we are safe from the operations of power and oppression.

Biesta locates the dominant notions of emancipation within enlightenment philosophy, and traces a broad trajectory of modern notions of emancipation throughout both philosophy and education. There are three contradictions with emancipation. The first is that emancipation, which is supposed to result in freedom, is predicated on the dependency of the emancipated. The second contradiction is that this dependency is an inequality; ‘the emancipator is the one who knows better and best and who can perform the act of demystification that is needed to expose the workings of power’ (p. 83). The third contradiction is that ‘although emancipation takes place in the interest of those to be emancipated, it is based upon a fundamental distrust of and suspicion about their experiences’ (p. 83). By turning to Rancière, Biesta links emancipation to subjectification, defining the former as ‘a rupture that is the appearance of subjectivity’ (p. 84). Contrary to the dependency, inequality, and distrust that characterize modern notions of emancipation, this type of emancipation assumes equality as the starting point of emancipation (see also Bingham & Biesta, 2010). This is a weak understanding of emancipation because it ‘does not come with a guarantee that emancipators can simply produce the emancipation of those entrusted to them’ (Biesta, 2013, p. 98). Like all good education, the outcome cannot be predicted or known in advance. Likewise, through this process of subjectification, we risk ourselves and each other so that we might be able to produce a rupture in the order of things and emerge as unique, singular beings.

Biesta proposes the themes contained within the book as a set of offerings that, in order to become real, ‘need to be taken up by others in ways that are necessarily beyond my control and my intentions...they need to be “risked”’ (p. xi). Over the past few years, educators and educational theorists have increasingly been taking up Biesta’s ‘beginnings’ in new ways (e.g. Gomes, 2012; Ford, 2013; Kovacs & Frost, 2012). The Beautiful Risk provides several more new and promising beginnings and, as high-stakes testing, standardization, and regimented accountability structures continue to reduce education to routinized learning and work to repress subjectification in the name of qualification and socialization, we would do well to take them up.
References


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